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Rudolf, Peter

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Stellungnahme / comment

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rudolf, P. (2002). *Thrown into crisis? German-American relations in a period of strategic change*. (SWP Comment, 05/2002). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-404878>

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# Thrown into Crisis?

German-American Relations in a Period of Strategic Change

*Peter Rudolf*

Recent tensions at the governmental level do not yet add up to a crisis in German-American relations. But political divergences and dissonances are an expression of structural conflicts in the transatlantic relationship that have been intensified by the post-September 11 strategy shift in American global policy. The emerging paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy confronts Germany's policy toward the United States with new challenges. These challenges cannot be mastered through either unreflective opposition or reflexive loyalty; rather, they require a strategically conscious approach toward the United States.

Such an astute observer as Henry Kissinger already speaks about a «crisis» in German-American relations. Kissinger attributes responsibility to the way in which Chancellor Gerhard Schröder handled the topic of Iraq in the recent German election campaign. The electoral benefits derived from this strategy allegedly suggest that a kind of anti-Americanism may have become «a permanent temptation of German politics.» Yet according to Kissinger's thesis, the issue of Iraq is merely «a pretext for a reorientation of German foreign policy in a more national direction.» The new «German way» – in whose name Germany allegedly sought confrontation with the U.S. without consulting other European states – represents a challenge not only to the U.S. but also to Europe.

More than a decade after the disappearance of the common threat of Soviet com-

munist, and after the departure of old political elites that were shaped by the experiences of World War II and the Cold War, does the special German-American relationship finally belong to history? Is it accurate to argue that German foreign policy is moving in the direction of unilateralism and nationalism? Twelve years after unification, is Germany finally fulfilling the expectations of those U.S. security policy experts who could not imagine that Germany's leaders had internalized constraints on the use of power and come to understand national interests in a multilateral sense?

From a «realist» view of international relations, it was expected that, after the end of the Cold War, Germany would turn toward a nationalistic foreign policy stance that increasingly emphasizes and asserts its own interests. Whoever shares this view

must certainly interpret the confrontation over Iraq as an indication of such a development. From this perspective, the strain in U.S.–German government relations is a harbinger of a deeper crisis. But can one seriously speak of a «crisis» in German-American relations – a crisis that could lead to a complete breakdown or even a breaking off of relations? (Moreover: how would such a pessimistic scenario concretely unfold?)

One could speak of a crisis in German-American relations if the geopolitical premise of the relationship – the role of the U.S. as a stabilizing force in Europe – were called into question. Yet it is precisely the foreign policy debates on both sides of the Atlantic that demonstrate how durable this premise remains. The U.S. remains necessary as a European power – and this is the core of the geopolitical premise – in order to allay fears of an overly powerful Germany. In the words of German Foreign Minister Fischer, «Without transatlantic relations in Europe, including the Europe of today, Germany would immediately assume a role for which we should definitely not strive. This would put too much strain on us. The U.S. provides not only a global balance; it also provides a balance in Europe up to this very day.»

It may be the case that foreign policy elites are still clinging to the old geopolitical premise while, in public opinion, a re-evaluation of relations has long been taking place that could eventually make its way to the political level. In German public opinion – in which the «big partner» naturally plays a much more influential role than Germany does in U.S. public opinion – one can recognize a certain shift toward a more skeptical view of the international role played by the U.S. The extent of American power, and particularly its unilateral deployment in the pursuit of narrow national interests, appears to be the most important factor contributing to a less positive view of the U.S. in German public opinion (see *Der Spiegel*, May 18, 2002, pp. 26–31). Nearly two-thirds of Germans

share the opinion that the U.S. is pursuing only its own interests when it intervenes in the world's crisis regions. Less than 10 years ago, in 1993, only 58 percent expressed this opinion. An even more significant indicator of changing attitudes toward the international role of the U.S. is the declining number of Germans who view the U.S. as the guarantor of peace and security throughout the world. In 2002 only 48 percent shared this view, compared to 62 percent in 1993. These changing figures might be interpreted as an expression of attitudes toward the policies of the current U.S. president, which tend to be negative: in spring 2002, only 19 percent of Germans expressed a positive opinion of the current president, while 50 percent held a negative opinion.

In the case of Germany, however, less positive attitudes toward the international role of the U.S. might be connected to frustrated expectations, i.e., the disappointed hope for a relationship with the U.S. that is based on real partnership. In 1993, when Germans were asked whether the U.S. played a dominating role in German-American relations or whether Germany had become an equal partner, opinions were still very mixed. Less than 10 years later, the German public appears to have shed all illusions: 73 percent ascribe a dominating role to the U.S., while 26 percent still consider Germany an equal partner. Nevertheless, a more skeptical view of the United States should not be equated with increasing anti-Americanism. The number of persons holding self-declared anti-American attitudes remains relatively constant at one-fourth of the population.

### **Structural Conflicts in Transatlantic Relations**

This shift in public opinion reflects changes in American foreign policy. And the problems that both the German public and German foreign policy currently have with the U.S. – its tendency to act unilaterally, its avoidance of genuine consultations, and its

disdain for international institutions – converge over the issue of Iraq.

The issue of Iraq encompasses a number of structural conflicts in transatlantic relations that have been exacerbated by strategic shifts in American foreign policy under President Bush. Seen in this way, the conflict over Iraq represents a deeper estrangement in foreign policy that includes divergent foreign policy priorities and different threat perceptions.

In a June 2002 article in *Policy Review* that received considerable attention on both sides of the Atlantic, Robert Kagan offered an explanation for this development that is certainly plausible at first glance: the tremendous gap in military power between the U.S. and Europe is causing an increasing number of divergent foreign policy perspectives – even ideologies. According to Kagan, those with military strength develop a propensity to use that strength. Those who lack this strength develop an understandable aversion to the exercise of military power. This gap in military resources has a particularly strong effect on threat perceptions. Consequently, Europe and the U.S. apply different benchmarks to the question of what constitutes a tolerable or intolerable threat. Weakness causes states to downplay or even ignore threats, a fact that can easily be explained psychologically. Yet these threats are also «objectively» different for both sides. Kagan argues that, precisely because of its power and its corresponding international role as a guarantor of stability, the U.S. is under a far greater threat from «rogue states» such as Iraq.

Kagan's argument appears quite persuasive. Yet – as numerous analysts have objected – it disregards differences within Europe itself. This applies particularly to different traditions in the exercise of military power (thus Kagan appears above all to have Germany in mind when he speaks of Europe). Furthermore, this type of analysis elevates the foreign policy perspectives and preferences of American neoconservatives – and Kagan ranks as one of the most highly published neo-

conservative analysts – to the level of U.S. foreign policy «ideology.» Despite the fact that the U.S. always pursues a *sui generis* foreign policy due to its particular political culture and its position of extraordinary power, there are still diverse schools of thought in the U.S. foreign policy establishment. The extent to which U.S. strategy diverges from that of Europe is not a given, but rather depends among other things on power constellations in Washington.

It is not true that – to borrow Kagan's now-famous dictum – Germans live on Venus and Americans live on Mars. Rather, it is those neoconservatives within the U.S. foreign policy elite who live on another planet – those «belligerent and divisive voices,» in the words of former President Carter, who currently set the tone in Washington. A glance at the prevailing collective preferences of both societies reveals no fundamental divide in their views of the world. Overall, a majority of Americans and Europeans share a positive view of international institutions. The majority of the American public prefers a multilateral rather than a unilateral orientation toward foreign policy. Even the Germans are far less negatively disposed to the exercise of military power than references to Mars and Venus imply. However, the German public is mostly inclined to support the exercise of military power when it is used for humanitarian interventions and the maintenance of the international legal order. A majority of Europeans also favor the use of military power in the fight against terrorism (see [www.worldview.org](http://www.worldview.org)).

### **A Strategy Shift in Washington**

U.S. public opinion, which distinguishes itself through a collective «rationality» and considerable stability, does place constraints on foreign policy and serves as a framework for discussions and decision-making processes among American political elites. Yet actual U.S. foreign policy can occasionally diverge significantly from

public opinion. This is especially the case when the president, in situations of heightened threat perception, succeeds in increasing his power and influence relative to Congress. September 11 provided President Bush with the opportunity to give a strategic focus to American foreign policy. However, in contrast to widespread hopes, this opportunity was not used to adopt a stronger multilateral approach but rather to mobilize resources in favor of a strongly military-oriented policy of global power. Against the backdrop of an increased awareness of asymmetrical threats, and using the «war against terror» as a basis to gain domestic political legitimacy, the school of thought favoring the assertion of superior military strength and unlimited freedom of action succeeded in dominating the political discourse in the U.S.

The policy that is becoming apparent in Washington amounts to a profound strategic change: a near-imperial global political strategy is emerging that could in the longer term lead to a crisis in transatlantic relations. As analyzed by G. John Ikenberry in the September/October issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the contours of this new strategic «paradigm» can be clearly discerned. Core elements of this strategy include: the preservation of unipolarity, i.e., the maintenance of military supremacy regardless of potential threats and adversaries; a heightened perception of intolerable threats, which has led to the rejection of containment as the fundamental concept of security policy with respect to the new threats; and the preemptive or even preventive use of military force. As a consequence, the U.S. wants to free itself from constraints on the exercise of military power. States that support terrorism in whatever form no longer enjoy the protection of the principle of sovereignty.

### **The Iraq Controversy**

This is the strategic context in which both U.S. policy toward Iraq as well as the German position must be evaluated. If one

takes a sober look at the problems and dilemmas that U.S. policy toward Iraq has raised, the position of the German federal government appears by no means to be as unreasonable as many critics believe, despite all electoral tactics and all the loud noise that surrounded the election campaign. Without the well-known putative or actual historical comparisons between Bush and Hitler – which in any case were completely incorrect and insulting to American ears – the position taken by Germany would never have had to lead to such «poisoned» relations between the German and American governments. These comparisons made it easier for the U.S. administration – in partly genuine, partly staged indignation – to punish its long-time ally with a withdrawal of affection. The administration did so perhaps with the intention of influencing the German debate to its advantage, but also with the goal of preventing other states from engaging in that kind of blunt criticism of its Iraq policy.

Political positions that are adopted with electoral results in mind are not necessarily devoid of strategic rationality. Whoever considers it wrong and dangerous to pursue a policy of regime change through military intervention – and this is exactly what the warnings and questions directed by the German government to the United States boil down to – logically cannot support a coercive diplomacy whose demands for new and unconditional weapons inspections are largely instrumental. Upon closer look at the American debate, this is the impression that has been emerging forcefully for quite some time, at the very latest since Vice President Cheney's speech in late August 2002. Subsequent statements of U.S. policy toward Iraq have continued to be characterized by ambiguous rhetoric. However, doubt had long been cast on the assumption that threats of regime change simply served the purpose of achieving Iraqi disarmament, and that Secretary of State Powell would ultimately convince the president to accept new weapons inspec-

tions. According to everything that is currently known, the fundamental decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein, using military means if necessary, appears to have been made within the administration shortly after September 11 – without a formal decision-making process, without a National Intelligence Estimate to assess actual threat levels, and within a small circle of actors who largely share the same views.

If one had adopted the American line, how could one then have credibly rejected possible future American demands to participate? This would have meant supporting a policy that one objectively considered wrong and overly risky even if it were ultimately sanctioned by the UN Security Council under U.S. pressure. The doubts, criticisms, and questions expressed by the German government were of the kind that are repeatedly articulated in the American debate as well: doubts concerning the allegedly growing threat posed by Iraq, doubts concerning the United States' willingness to be involved long-term in the construction of a new order in Iraq and the Middle East after a military intervention had ended, and doubts concerning the wisdom of a policy that – in the midst of the war against Islamist terrorism – sought to open up a new conflict before progress had been made toward achieving peace in the Middle East. Yet it was an unusual provocation when Chancellor Schröder – in an interview with the *New York Times* – publicly expressed such fundamental doubts about the wisdom of American policy and reproached the Bush administration for changing its policy in favor of regime change in Iraq without consulting its allies. Given the state of the American debate, this was certainly an appropriate attempt to influence it – at the cost of creating bad blood with the Bush administration, which must have viewed such insubordination from a loyal ally as unwelcome considering the domestic controversies surrounding the Iraq issue and the relatively «soft» support of the American public for a potential war with Iraq.

Those who argue that such actions have reduced Germany's influence on American policy to a minimum must be able to present a plausible argument as to how a different approach would have enabled Germany to be more effective in influencing U.S. policy. As a member of the UN Security Council, France was at least able to apply tactical brakes after the Bush administration decided to work through the United Nations in an effort to solidify domestic political support and to show consideration for Great Britain. Germany is not able to exercise this form of influence (although one can ask why Germany and France did not agree early on to pursue a common approach). There was no prospect of a common European position from the outset due to Great Britain's one-sided adoption of Washington's stance. Nevertheless, Germany's reservations concerning U.S. policy toward Iraq reflected a more widespread European discomfort and not just the predominant mood of the German electorate. In this respect, Germany in no way stood in isolation with its reservations.

A more serious critique is contained in the assertion that the German government's sweeping rejection of even a potential UN-sanctioned military intervention represents, as Stefan Kornelius argued in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, «a dramatic change in German foreign policy away from multilateralism and international organizations.» The reason that this issue is not debated may be, as he argues, that no one takes such a foreign policy shift seriously. Yet such a discussion would be desirable, because the fundamental question does not even appear to have been asked: Should Germany support a policy that is viewed as strategically incorrect and morally dubious simply for the sake of a multilaterally oriented foreign policy? Even with a clear UN mandate and the consequent legality of subsequent actions according to international law, questions would still remain concerning the strategic rationality and moral legitimacy of a war to overthrow the Iraqi regime.

## War and Its Justification

The «war against terror» and a potential war against Iraq have raised the most troublesome question for German foreign policy and, as a result, for German-American relations: How does one justify the exercise of military force? Apart from the left fringe of the German political and intellectual elite, there was widespread support for «Operation Enduring Freedom.» Three-fifths of the German public supported the operation, and approximately one-third did not. The intervention could be justified as a legitimate form of self-defense, even though the way in which the war was conducted aroused concern. Yet it was left to a group of German intellectuals, responding to an open letter by prominent American intellectuals that had received widespread international attention, to equate civilian casualties in Afghanistan with the mass murders of September 11. In their letter, these American intellectuals had justified the war in Afghanistan by referring to the principles of *bellum justum*, or «just war.»

This tradition of «just war» could serve as the basis for a common frame of reference when assessing the moral legitimacy of military intervention. Unfortunately, the German intellectuals participating in this transatlantic discussion refused to debate this issue, in contrast to their colleagues in the U.S. and Great Britain. There is a great reluctance in Germany to apply the principles of «just war,» even among those who are not fundamental adherents of pacifism. This is because these principles are perceived as a dangerous form of legitimizing war. There appears to be insufficient awareness in Germany that references to the «just war» tradition within the American debate currently serve a largely critical function.

Certain participants in the lively American debate over the moral legitimacy of a war to achieve regime change seek to apply the classic criteria of the «just war» tradition. Following the example of the Catholic church, a number of churches – including Lutherans and Methodists – have expressed

criticism and doubt toward a war to achieve regime change (support for such a policy is heard only from the evangelical, fundamentalist camp). These critical voices make common reference to the classic tradition in its current interpretation, which is about elaborating limiting criteria for the use of military force and evaluating it on the basis of both principles and consequences. This represents a critical challenge to those other American perspectives on the legitimacy of war that are so problematic from the German point of view: the one being the «realist» view of international relations that has few legal and moral qualms regarding the use of military force to assert national security interests; the other being the view that wars against «evil states» are morally justified and even represent a moral obligation. This latter view reflects what Senator William Fulbright once called «the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit.»

## Challenges for German Policy toward the United States

If eager neoconservatives succeed in transforming the U.S. into a «crusader state» that wages preventive wars, transatlantic relations will suffer further estrangement. But this development is in no way unavoidable; in fact, it is not even likely. It is highly doubtful that September 11 has changed the domestic political context of American foreign policy to such a profound extent that the imperial approach will gain the upper hand. The current exceptional foreign policy circumstances that have strengthened the president's power will not persist in the long term.

It is to be hoped that, after long debates, the logic of the «American system» (G. John Ikenberry) will prevail. This «American system» denotes the institutionalized form of «benign hegemony» built up by the U.S. after 1945, with its preference for multilateral institutions and mechanisms that enable other states to bring in their inter-

ests and perspectives. Such a return to the «old» strategic framework might be fostered by influencing American debates and decisions to the extent that this is at all possible for external actors. This will be no easy task for German and European policies toward the U.S.

In the spirit of its own self-constraint, Germany is interested in the continuation of good transatlantic relations as the basic framework for German foreign policy. This is the widespread premise that guides German political discourse. However, in order for Europe to assert itself, it will be necessary to change transatlantic relations in the direction of cooperative balance. In this field of tension, it will be necessary to deal constructively with the transatlantic dilemma that results from asymmetric power and strategic divergence within the alliance. If Germany were to reject the new security agenda of the United States, the U.S. could lose interest in the alliance, and Germany's influence on the U.S. would decline accordingly. If Germany fully aligns itself with the American agenda, it will risk a costly and perilous involvement in policies over which it has little to no influence. It is a question of political judgment as to how much the United States' interest in NATO would decline if its European allies refused to align themselves with the global orientation of the Bush doctrine, in which the «new» NATO and its centerpiece – the multinational NATO Response Force proposed by the U.S. – play a pivotal role. Pragmatically speaking, with or without a Response Force, NATO will remain important to the U.S. as an anchor of stability in Europe. Due to its joint exercises and planning procedures, NATO is a security organization that, despite its limited ability to act collectively, provides a reservoir for «coalitions of the willing» under American leadership. However, it can be expected that Washington will continue to send signals that call into question the relevance of NATO in its «old» form and that arouse German concerns about the durability of transatlantic relations.

It is necessary to develop a strategically conscious approach in dealing with the U.S. – an approach that will vary according to specific interests and problems. Depending on considerations of costs and benefits, it is possible to distinguish *three* fundamental strategic *options* for dealing with specific fields of conflict in transatlantic relations. The *first* option involves «bandwagoning» or adopting a position of solidarity with American policy. This might occur because American actions coincide with European interests, or because, in the case of divergent interests, cooperation with the U.S. would allow Europe to influence the development of policies determined primarily by the United States. The *second* option involves «balancing,» i.e., the assertion of separate European interests in confrontation with the U.S. The *third* option might be labeled «cooperative confrontation,» i.e., a refusal to follow current American policy in order to improve prospects for future cooperation. This might occur because such a refusal would serve to influence policy debates in the U.S., or because an outright refusal, or an agreement to adopt U.S. policy only under specific conditions, would force the U.S. administration to change its position. This would be the case if a particular policy could not be put into action without the cooperation of significant allies. This is an important point, because it is precisely the non-military arena in which Europe has important assets to offer or to refuse, a fact that is frequently underestimated in American discussions. The more the U.S. faces the unwanted task of «nation-building» (e.g., in Afghanistan or, if Saddam Hussein is overthrown, in Iraq), the more it will have to rely on cooperative efforts.

Political discourse and the coordination of policy in crucial new areas represent the challenge to transatlantic relations. The overall situation in the Middle East confronts U.S.-European relations with extraordinarily complex questions. It is in the Middle East that a reservoir of recruits exists for Islamist terrorism. It is here that



Iran, considered by the U.S. to be a «terrorist state,» might have nuclear weapons at its disposal in the not too distant future. It is here that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to await a solution. And it is here that the political and economic development of many states provides little reason for hope. More than ever, this region will be the focal point of American attention and will therefore by necessity be a crucial aspect of transatlantic policy coordination. The task will be to incorporate the new agenda propagated not only by American neoconservatives – including the political opening and democratization of Arab-Islamic states – without succumbing to the naïve illusions and imperial temptations of this agenda. German policy should attempt early on to influence the U.S. debate and the transatlantic agenda. It should not – as has been the case with Iraq – leave the initiative entirely to the U.S. and take action only reactively, without its own concept, after the room for maneuver has become very narrow.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)